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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: FORMER RULING PARTY NARROWLY WINS ELECTIONS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Maldives held its first multiparty parliamentary elections on May 9. Long delays in counting and announcing results led to unruly protests and some violence in the capital, Male'. Provisional results announced by the Elections Commission on May 11 showed that the party of former President Gayoom edged out the current ruling party of President Nasheed. Another party allied to the former President came in third. Independent candidates, who won 13 seats, may prove to be the deciding factor in which party gains effective control of the new Parliament. A de facto opposition majority could prove difficult for the government to manage, frustrating many initiatives in its reform agenda. End summary.

12. (U) The Republic of Maldives held its first multiparty parliamentary elections on May 9th. Several election observation groups, such as Transparency Maldives, the British Commonwealth, and a group of Colombo-based diplomats organized by the European Commission Delegation were present to witness whether the elections were conducted in a free and fair manner.

PROVISIONAL RESULTS: NARROW WIN FOR OPPOSITION

13. (U) Provisional official results show the main opposition party, former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), winning 28 seats, edging out the ruling Maldivian National Party (MDP) with 26 seats. The People's Alliance (PA) is winning 7 seats, giving the opposition DRP-PA alliance a total of 35 seats, just four short of a majority in the 77-member Majlis. The smaller members of the coalition government apparently won only three seats. The Dhivehi Qaumei Party (DQP, earlier "New Maldives") of former Attorney General Hassan Saeed and current Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed are leading in just two constituencies, while the Republican (Jumhooree) party of former Atolls Minister Gasim Ibrahim is winning just one. It appears the remaining coalition parties - the Adaalath Party, the Social Liberal Party, Maldives National Congress and National Alliance will not be represented in the new Majlis.

MDP WILL NEED TO ATTRACT INDEPENDENTS

14. (SBU) President Nasheed welcomed the outcome and the election as an important step for democracy, adding that the opposition would keep the government accountable to the public. However, the results can only come as a disappointment to President Nasheed's MDP, which was hoping to win 50 seats or more. The MDP will now have to scramble to keep its erstwhile allies - the biggest losers in this election - on board, and then attract the support of the lion's

share of the independents. This may occur on an ad-hoc basis. The lack of a stable working majority would obviously hinder the MDP in pushing forward its proposed legislative agenda comprising 65 bills, including legislation on transport, taxation, public utilities, housing, health insurance, privatization, and reforming the drug laws, penal code and criminal justice system.

A SMOOTH START...

15. (U) The presence of the observer groups appeared to help, as the election officers made efforts to ensure that the election process was transparent. Early on, the majority of the complaints involved voters turning up at the wrong polling station. Most of these were resolved quickly, without the need to file a formal complaint with the National Complaint Bureau.

... A TURN FOR THE WORSE

16. (SBU) As election day progressed, more serious complaints began to emerge. There were campaign materials posted directly across from a polling station and a candidate campaigning in the vicinity of a polling station, both violations of election regulations. Observers representing an independent candidate filed a complaint, which was not effectively handled by the complaints bureau. There were also a number of allegations of bribery, intimidation and complaints against elections officials and observers.

17. (SBU) At the end of the day, confusion and frustration arose during the scheduled close of polling stations when the Election

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Commission (EC) notified polling stations that instead of closing the polls at 8 p.m., they would extend voting until 1 a.m. Polling stations were also notified that no registration complaints would be accepted after 8 p.m., but that other types of complaints could still be filed. Soon after came another announcement that stations with unresolved complaints would remain open while stations with no outstanding complaints and nobody waiting in the queue could close the polls and begin counting ballots.

IMPATIENCE LEADS TO VIOLENCE

18. (U) Independent candidate Ibrahim Waheed expressed concern about possible ballot stuffing, saying he feared that the situation could turn violent. Waheed's fears of violence were realized when a crowd of 300 to 400 protesters, including members of the main opposition DRP, gathered at 10:30 p.m. outside the temporary elections Commission headquarters for tabulating votes, demanding that the results of the elections be announced. The protest turned violent, and a 20-year-old man was stabbed in the chest and stomach and remains in critical condition. Police have taken two men into custody in connection with the incident.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the unfortunate violence, mechanical imperfections and the delay in posting results, in our judgment the election was relatively free and fair. The results - a clear, if narrow, opposition win - appear to speak for themselves. If, as some analysts expect, most of the independent candidates align themselves with one of the two main groupings, then Maldives may be headed for a period of consolidation in which two parties predominate. Maldives' "presidential" constitution and its first-past-the post electoral system may reinforce this tendency.

MOORE